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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 001805

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/13/2029
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KS](#)
SUBJECT: PRIME MINISTER SEES GLOBAL ROLE FOR ROK, BUT
FOCUSED ON DOMESTIC ISSUES

REF: SEOUL 1548

Classified By: Ambassador Kathleen Stephens. Reasons 1.4 (b), (d).

¶1. (C) In a very friendly 30-minute meeting, Prime Minister Chung Un-chan received Ambassador Stephens on November 12. The Ambassador congratulated the Prime Minister on his new position and expressed appreciation for his readiness to receive American officials, including Deputy Secretary Steinberg and Defense Secretary Gates, in the very busy early days of his tenure. The Prime Minister asked the Ambassador's views on the state of U.S.-ROK relations. Chung said in his view the primary reason the ROK was sending a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) to Afghanistan was because of the felt need to support the United States as an ally. But, Chung said, he was also coming to understand that the ROK had an obligation to play a more active role in the world.

¶2. (C) Chung said the November 10 South-North naval clash was a reminder of how important the U.S.-ROK alliance was to the ROK. He was grateful, he said, for all the U.S. had done for Korea. His meeting schedule is indicative of his warm disposition to the U.S. His meeting with the Ambassador was Chung's third meeting with U.S. officials since being sworn in on September 29. He asked us to keep his meeting with Ambassador Stephens quiet because he does not plan on receiving other Ambassadors.

¶3. (C) Comment: To date, Chung's sole task has been to resolve the Sejong City controversy (reftel). Chung listened with interest to the Ambassador's description of other issues in the bilateral relationship but made it clear he did not intend to engage unless we specifically requested it. Sejong City may be a poisoned chalice, or it may be the issue on which Chung, a respected centrist scholar but an untested politician, builds a political future. Previous Prime Ministers have played different roles, depending on their abilities and relationship to the President. It is widely believed that President Lee chose Chung, who is a native of the Sejong City area, solely to revise the plan to relocate half of the government to Sejong City.

¶4. (C) Bio Note: Despite having spent years in the U.S. studying and teaching, Chung is reluctant in his official capacity to interact with U.S. officials without an interpreter. Chung completed an MA in Economics at Miami University and a Ph.D. at Princeton. He taught for two years at Columbia University from 1976-1978. Before becoming Prime Minister, Chung interacted with Embassy officers in English, but he relied on an interpreter throughout his meeting with the Ambassador.
STEPHENS